

FAME

The Phenomenon

Mark Thorburn interviews David De Silva, creator of FAME, in New York, as he prepares to premiere the sequel.



Fame, the Musical is a modern theatrical phenomenon. It has been professionally produced in the UK for the past 10 years, so I decided to speak to the man who created it all. Known as 'Father Fame', David de Silva lives in New York, but is coming to Scotland this month for the launch of something very special, writes Mark Thorburn.

The original 'Fame' film was hugely successful in the 1980s. Whose idea was it and have you been involved from the start?

Yes, I conceived the idea for the original film screenplay and produced the film with MGM.

However, my first love has always been the theatre, so I retained the stage rights when I signed the film contract. I always felt that *Fame* was a natural musical story for the theatre. After all, it is based on a real stage school in New York and as such was the first 'reality' musical.

What, when and where were its beginnings? Did it debut in New York?

The stage production premiered at the Coconut Grove Theatre in Miami in 1988. Many of the original cast continued to work on the show and pretty much the same cast then played it again at the Walnut Street Theatre in Philadelphia (which, incidentally, is the oldest theatre in the USA) in 1989. It was after this production that Music Theatre International decided to publish the show, which was a huge step forward for us.

In 1993 there was a \$1million production, in Swedish, in Stockholm, which I went to see with the Stoll Moss Group from London. The Swedish creative team then re-created that production, in English, for London in 1995. It was hugely successful, playing the Cambridge Theatre for a year and a half, before setting off on its first National Tour and somehow kept returning annually to London!

Between 1995 and 2006 it has played the Cambridge Theatre twice, the Victoria Palace twice, the Prince of Wales and then the Aldwych Theatre for three years, making it a continuous ten years of professional production in the UK.

The fifth Tour goes out in

January 2007, opening in Nottingham and will move to the King's Theatre Glasgow and onto Edinburgh in April. Whilst the professionals are touring *Fame*, the amateur Apollo Players will be appearing at the King's Theatre in Glasgow in April 2007 in the World Premiere of the sequel to *Fame*, entitled *Fame Forever*, which is more of an adult musical, still with the kids at the school, but more adults involved. They have presented the original show four times now and the last time in April this year they grossed their biggest ever box office at £105,000.

In the sequel, the *Fame* character Carmen, who sang the title number which proclaimed, *I'm Gonna Live Forever, Remember My Name*, returns in spirit. The new show is set in 2004, when the class of '84 has their 20th Anniversary Re-Union, which signals the re-birth of that spirit that the kids from *Fame* embody – the body may die, but the creative spirit is re-born and lives forever.

What input did you have into the television series?

Television is not my favourite medium and so I was a Consultant Producer for the TV series. To me, television is production by Committee and I would have had to re-locate from New York to Los Angeles, which I didn't want to do. Also the television viewer is detached from the television experience, whereas in the theatre the live experience is what it is all about. Theatre has played an important role in the success of *Fame*. At the same time as the television series was being made, I was working on the theatre production.

Were there any close similarities between the television version and the stage version?

Nothing was taken from the television series in the creation of the stage version. I wanted to create a theatre piece, not a compilation show, with all its inherent difficulties.

Steve Margoshes came in as Composer and we set about creating a musical based on what really happens in the school. The film version had so raised the awareness of the High School for Performing Arts in New York that they had 10,000 apply to audition the year after the film came out!

The stage show centres on the class of '84. Act One is Freshman Year and after, 1980 - 1982, Act Two is 1983 - 1984 and the show follows three actors, four dancers and three musicians in their relationships over their four year training period. It has a terrific score, is full of energy and is very inspirational for young people. Their parents remember it from the film and TV series and so it inspires each generation and they keep coming back to the show.

Has it toured the USA as much as it has the UK? What about elsewhere?

It has had worldwide success. It plays each year in Japan and Korea. It toured Australia with great success. The Italian Tour lasted for three years. It is in its second season in Madrid and will tour Spain next year. All the Scandinavian countries have played it, plus Germany and it arrives in Prague next year.

Was it successful in New York?

It played nine months Off-Broadway in New York in 2003 in the 499-seater Little Schubert Theatre, with a cast of 30 and an 8 piece orchestra. It was a great, intimate experience but, economically, not successful. It did tour the United States for three years.

There appears to have been no major restrictions for the UK amateurs producing the show while the London run and the tour continued. Do you think that has contributed to the overall success of the show?

No restrictions on amateur productions has meant that one feeds off the other. The youngsters want to see the professional show and it inspires them in their own productions. In any one year there have been between 50 and 100 school and amateur productions, while the show still toured and played the West End. It is simpler to stage than either *West Side Story* or *A Chorus Line*, and more young people know of it because they have seen it or been involved in a live production of it.

With more and more productions, there are more and more people involved – do you fear or have you

experienced a dilution of the original concept or any of the dynamism that it had?

I don't feel that there is any dilution of the original concept, because it is a blue print for each director and choreographer to work with the talent they have. There can be no interpolations of other songs but adjustments to the staging can be made to suit to facilities and cast involved. The control is there within the written framework and you trust that the show will remain strong.

What reasons do you give for the huge success of the show?

The show is multi-cultural, it is inclusive, because the young can play themselves. It is a springboard for young talent.

Because it is about young performers you always get the raw energy of the young. It has given employment and experience to vast numbers of amateur and professional. How do you feel about that?

Some go from a school or amateur production to try for their first professional job, but not all. By taking part in *Fame* they are not necessarily going to go for a professional stage career, but their experience of being in such a show will enhance their life. The theatre world has come a long way in 20 years. Now we have Pop Idol and American Idol and the kids think that they can virtually walk through their TV screen and perform. *Fame* shows them a little more of the reality of it all.

Looking back on FAME through the years and the success – how do you feel about it? Did you ever get the feeling that this huge phenomenon could have been coming?

Looking back, I feel that I have channelled the show; that I have helped create the whole phenomenon that it has become. I really feel blessed. I trained as a teacher and I trained as an actor and this has been the perfect show to use both of those talents. I feel the same way about *Fame Forever*, a story of re-union and re-birth, which is a natural progression from the original *Fame* with the spirit of the characters coming back as they do from Greek to Shakespearean drama.

What other stage and film works have you written?

I have written no other theatre work, other than *Fame* and now the sequel *Fame Forever*, which is an original work and which will stand alone from *Fame*. Although the premiere will be in Glasgow, we can now confirm that the Rattonians will produce the two shows back to back at the Congress Theatre in Eastbourne for two weeks from 18th July, 2007 and Cheltenham Operatic Society have set a production of *Fame Forever*, hopefully in February 2008. By premiering this new work within UK Community Theatre, it allows the productions to have a much bigger cast and orchestra than can now be afforded professionally.

A final thought?

www.FAMENETWORK.COM is an interactive website for *Fame* around the world. Judging by the daily e-mail we receive, I think we continue to be a phenomenon because we are truly an inspirational show for young people everywhere. We were for the parents in the 1980's and now we are for their kids. This is the most rewarding thing of all.

SOME FAME FACTS

- 4 million people have seen the UK professional production of the show since its launch in 1995, with a total gross box office of £55 million so far...

- There were over 700 kids lined up to audition for the first West End production in 1995, since when over 5000 performers have auditioned for the show and 600 performers, musicians and technicians have worked on the production since its launch.

- The production was nominated for 2 Olivier Awards in 1996 : Best New Musical and Best Choreography.

- *Fame* has had 3 West End runs : 1995 - 1996, 1997 and 2003 - 2006 and been on 3 UK National Tours 1996 - 97, 2000 and 2002-03 and begins a brand new Tour in Nottingham in January 2007.

- It has had four West End homes in the Victoria Palace, Cambridge, Prince of Wales and Aldwych Theatres and has visited over 60 regional theatres during its UK Tours, many of them 2 or 3 times.

- 250 plasters, 100 joint supports and 10 tubes of deep heat are used in any one month – and 100 cans of deodorant.

For more information on the professional productions : www.famethemusical.co.uk



The First Production Meeting of FAME FOREVER at Joe Allen's in New York 24 September, 2006 From Left: Bob Gustafson (Music Supervisor), Ben Winters (Book & Lyrics) Steve Margoshes (Music), David De Silva (Father Fame), John Carlyle (Apollo Players, Glasgow)



Over 100 amateur productions are mounted each year in the UK alone

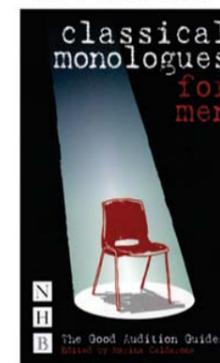
Fame - The Musical
Music by Steve Margoshes, Lyrics by Jacques Levy, Book by Jose Fernandez based on a concept by David de Silva Title Song by Dean Pitchford and Michael Gore
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